The Tunes of the Oregon Trail

Comedy is tragedy mellowed by time

Review by Kay Savetz

Title: *The Trail to Oregon*
Venue: Chapel Theater
Performance dates: February 16 to March 9, 2024
Runtime: 2.5 hours
Content: “Loads of adult language”
Playwright: Music and lyrics by Jeff Blim
Book by Nick Lang, Matt Lang, Brian Holden, and Jeff Blim
Directors: Landy Lamb and Illya deTorres
Production's archived website

A family endures struggles, hardships, and death as they make the trip from Independence, Missouri, to new opportunities in Oregon. A tale as old as time, a classic computer game, and — once again—a theatrical production. *The Trail to Oregon* is the third Oregon Trail-related theater performance that we know of, and the first musical.

The Trail to Oregon
A MUSICAL PARODY
FEB 16 – MAR 9, 2024
Music and lyrics by Jeff Blim • Book by Nick Lang, Matt Lang, Brian Holden, and Jeff Blim.
Arranged by Clark Baxtresser and Pierce Siebers • Originally produced by Starkid Productions
Starring: Kenzie Chapman, Tasha Danner, Illya deTorres, Landy Lamb, Sean Lamb, and Kylie Rose
Produced by Chapel Theatre • Directed by Illya deTores and Landy Lamb
★ At The Chapel Theatre in Milwaukie ★
Tickets at www.chapeltheatremilwaukie.com

The Trail to Oregon, a musical parody, ran at the Chapel Theater in Milwaukee, Oregon, from February 16 to March 9, 2024. The musical tells the story of a farming family who, after their Missouri farm burns down, decides to make the dangerous trip to Oregon in an ox-pulled wagon. Naturally, there are troubles along the way, including an unscrupulous wagon salesman, scheming bandits, marital troubles, a kidnapping, and — naturally — the ever-looming threat of dysentery.

As they make their perilous but hilarious journey, they sing about their plights: tunes include the upbeat “Pays to be an Animal”, sung while a character struggles with the ethics of hunting buffalo vs. starving; and “The World at Stake”, the mother’s striking, sweet power ballad.

The names of the five main characters in this ensemble cast change from show to show: audience members are invited to shout suggestions for family members’ names, adding a layer of improvised hilarity. On the night I went, the hapless father farmer chose the name Chester McCheese. The mother was Scooby. The old, confused grandpa was dubbed Joe Biden. In addition to character naming, the audience takes another role: during intermission, they vote on which family member will die of dysentery in the second act. Our audience chose the younger child, whose name was... not printable here.

The show’s content warning, “Loads of adult language”, should not be taken lightly, thanks to loads of double-entendres (the song “Caulk the Wagon” must have almost written itself). Grown-ups who pirated Apple Il games can handle it.

Community theater can vary widely in production quality. This run had sparse sets and hardly any props, but the audience quickly forgot about those when they heard the voices of the singers and appreciated the comic timing of the actors. Actor Landy Lamb, who played multiple characters including the general store owner, a saloon bartender, and a buffalo, was funny in each role.

There’s not much pandering to audience members who remember the Oregon Trail computer game except a “peperony and chease” joke and a song called “Speed Run” that could certainly be a reference to gaming. That’s for the best — the story and songs are solid fun even without a nostalgic pang. The other Oregon Trail plays we know of — The Oregon Trail by Bekah Brunstetter (Juiced.GS Volume 21, Issue 4) and Oregon Trail: The Play! by A.J. Allegra (Juiced.GS Volume 23, Issue 2) — are at least partially about the game. This show is solidly about the people on the trail.

The Trail to Oregon was first produced in 2014 by Starkid Productions, the musical theater company that went viral for the streaming success of its 2009 parody *A Very Potter Musical*. The company is also known for its 2018 show *The Guy Who Didn’t Like Musicals* and other musical parodies. Starkid’s original production of The Trail to Oregon is available on YouTube.

All in all, *The Trail to Oregon* is a fun show, ranging the gamut from raunchy to sweet to the uplifting final song about skinny-dipping as a family in a lake in their new Oregon home.

Find Kay on Bluesky.

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